

## Celebrating individual heroes: the continuing relevance of Estelle Brodman

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Imagine for a moment that you are a newly minted hospital librarian in Alton, Illinois, a small industrial city on the east side of the Mississippi River, a few miles north of St. Louis, Missouri—but a universe away from a large research-intensive academic health center. The library of Washington University Medical School in St. Louis, one of the country's great medical research institutions, is directed by Estelle Brodman, PhD. Dr. Brodman's reputation for scholarship and excellence is well known. Her reputation as a sometimes difficult and demanding personality is also well known. I was that new librarian "growing up" in a small hospital library on the other side of the river in Alton.

To me, Dr. Brodman was a fascinating character, highly respected and someone to emulate. I made her my role model, and I must confess that she has always been one of my heroes. She found innovative ways to put technology to work in her library, and she was willing to help those of us in small libraries join the revolution. She was extraordinarily visible in the Medical Library Association (MLA) because of the force of her personality, convictions, and scholarship. She was my "woman to be watched."

That Dr. Brodman is the subject of this *Journal of the Medical Library Association* focus issue is appropriate, for she represented excellence, boldness, and innovation for the generation of medical librarians practicing from the late 1940s until her retirement from Washington University in 1981. Her continuing relevance is the palpable sense of excellence, innovation, historical perspective, and professional service that are represented by her scholarly contributions and professional achievements.

Readers of biographies, autobiographies, and secondary history books know the power of understanding the platforms on which today is built. History helps ex-

plain the odd quirks of practice and culture that pervade professions, institutions, and countries. Above all, Dr. Brodman was a student of history and passionate about its power to predict future action. Those of you who have been in the same institution for a long period of time will recall feelings of *deja vu* when similar circumstances create similar results. Knowledge of this predictability is a great tool in managing upward in one's parent institution.

History is also extraordinarily valuable in times of great change. Our generation is not the first to experience the power of new technologies, nor is it the last. The more one understands how others such as Dr. Brodman have pushed through the trials and tribulations of change, the greater one's capacity to survive and thrive on the challenges of today.

When I was in library school (now well over a quarter of a century ago), the history of librarianship was given a small place in the curriculum. Yes, we heard about Ranganathan and Dewey, but we were more focused on things like grasping the merits of the computer, understanding cataloging rules, and reviewing reference sources than we were on understanding the past.

Thus my own grounding in the profession's history has come largely from MLA and its efforts to keep alive the names and impacts of those who were responsible for carving out the work of the profession. The annual awards ceremony recognizes many leaders whom I never met but whose names (and, in part, whose work) I instantly acknowledge.

Dr. Brodman is among those notables. The set of articles in this issue reveal the woman who worked on many fronts to improve the practice of medical librarianship. I am struck in reading these papers at the scope of her passions, her creativity, her willingness to contribute to the profession itself, and her seemingly boundless energy.

Dr. Brodman expected the highest performance from everyone. She loved nothing more than a good debate, which could be most intimidating to the unprepared. But she pushed us all to excel and to learn. And she pushed the boundaries of the medical library profession forward in many ways. Table 1 outlines some of the milestones in Dr. Brodman's long and distinguished career.

As I read the transcript of her oral history and the set of papers in this issue, I was struck by the heady times she must have had in her early years at the National Library of Medicine (NLM) as the NLM senior staff tried to imagine what could be done to bring the library into the twentieth century. She talked about long discussions (over coffee and drinks) about the concepts, ideas, and excitement of a highly intelligent team (including herself, Seymour Taine, Brad Rogers) that led to the development of the MEDical Literature Analysis and Retrieval System (MEDLARS) [1]. And I was reminded of my own stimulating late night conversations with extraordinarily bright MLA colleagues about medical libraries and our important work. For me, and I suspect for many, few things are more rewarding than having serious professional conversations with others of like mind and interest. Reading history simulates those conversations across the divide of time and space.

We are linked to our past and to our future in the worst of times and the best of times. Understanding where we have been is exhilarating. Recognizing where we are going is imperative. There are others in the profession who have much to teach us and whose stories need illuminating. We need to continue to celebrate these individual heroes and build a collective history to strengthen our community and reinvigorate our joy in health sciences librarianship.

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## Reference

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**Table 1**  
Estelle Brodman, PhD, career highlights

<b>Education</b>	1935: BA, histology and embryology, Cornell University 1936: BS, library science, Columbia University 1943: MS, library science, Columbia University 1953: PhD, history of medicine, Columbia University 1959: Postdoctoral study, University of California–Los Angeles 1961: Postdoctoral study, University of New Mexico
<b>Institutions served</b>	1937–1949: Columbia University 1949–1961: Army Medical Library/National Library of Medicine 1961–1981: Washington University School of Medicine 1947–1957: Editor, <i>Bulletin of the Medical Library Association</i> 1949–1952: Board of Directors, Special Libraries Association 1954: "The Development of Medical Bibliography" (PhD dissertation) published as Medical Library Association publication number 1 1962–1964: Member, MLA Board of Directors 1964–1965: President, MLA 1966–1968: Member, President's National Advisory Commission on Libraries 1971: MLA Janet Doe lecturer: "The Pursuit of Excellence" 1971: MLA Marcia C. Noyes Award (for distinguished librarianship) 1971–1975: Member, Biomedical Communications Study Section, National Institutes of Health (chair, 1973–1975) 1974: Doctor of sciences (honorary), University of Illinois Medical School 1977: MLA Murray Gottlieb Prize (for medical history) 1981: John Cotton Dana Award, Special Libraries Association 1993: Lisabeth M. Holloway Award, Archivists and Librarians in the History of the Health Sciences
<b>Career milestones</b>	
<b>Teaching/consulting</b>	1946–1951: Columbia University 1957: Catholic University 1962–1981: Washington University, Saint Louis (associate professor of the history of medicine in 1961, professor in 1964) 1962: Keio University, Tokyo (visiting professor, Rockefeller Foundation Fellowship) 1967–1968: Expert consultant for documentation, Central Family Planning Council, New Delhi, India 1970: Consultant for documentation, World Health Organization, Regional Office for Southeast Asia 1973: Consultant, Association for Population/Family Planning Libraries and Information Centers Development Institute, Bangkok, Thailand 1976–1977: Consultant, United Nations Fund for Population Activities